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ABSTRACT

This manual is intended to be used by parents, teachers, school administrators, students, community organizations and residents as a guide to identifying, planning, implementing, and maintaining large- and small-scale school improvement projects. Its sections address: (1) key terms and concepts; (2) types of school improvement projects; (3) creating the school improvement partnership; (4) planning a school improvement project-getting started; (5) planning a school improvement project-design; (6) school improvement project implementation; (7) marketing and promoting a school improvement project; (8) findings funds and volunteers; (9) school improvement project tools (preliminary school assessment tool, consensus tool, site selection tool, implementation planning tool, fundraising plan tool); and (10) case studies of a small project (Bladensburg High School sign) and a large project (Shadyside Elementary School master plan). (EV)

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Revitalization by Design

A Guide for Planning and Implementing School Improvement Projects through School-Community Partnerships

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Introduction

Most schools function beyond the traditional school day. School facilities are used for fostering the relationships of parents, teachers, and students; as gathering places for recreation, cultural and other events; and as educational and community-building opportunities for all neighborhood residents. The school as an institution has increasingly greater visibility within the community. As a result, communities are becoming more interested in the appearance and function of the school buildings and grounds.

Consider the school in your community. What does its appearance say about its relationship to the community? Does it invite the community in or does it turn its back? What does the school appearance say about its relationship with students and teachers? Could the school grounds better reflect the learning that happens inside the school buildings? Does it provide pleasant, interesting places for students and teachers to visit during lunch breaks and recess? Are there learning opportunities on the school grounds?

Addressing these questions is the first step in undertaking a school improvement project. This manual is intended to be used by parents, teachers, school administrators, students, community organizations and residents as a guide to identifying, planning, implementing, and maintaining large- and small-scale school improvement projects.

As a community place, the school and its grounds offer safe play areas for neighborhood children; opportunities for neighbors to interact on a casual basis; opportunities for community greening; and a sense of pride in both the school and community. Planning and implementing school improvement projects is an investment in both the school and the community and an increasingly appreciated community revitalization tool.

Key Terms and Concepts

The following are some terms and concepts you may encounter in planning and implementing a school improvement project.

Greening

Community greening is a movement to bring trees, plantings, and park settings into urban environments. It can also refer to the conversion of vacant land into natural habitats, parks, community gardens, and other public spaces.

Native Plants

Whenever possible, it is preferable to use native species of plants and trees. Native species are hardier, therefore requiring less maintenance, and support the local environment by providing natural habitats for birds and animals.

Natural Habitats

Habitats include native plants that are attractive to birds and animals, provide enough foliage and natural features for shelter, and include a source of water. Some habitats can include items such as bird or bat houses.

Hardscapes

While school grounds made entirely of asphalt or concrete are undesirable, a comprehensive playground has at least some paved areas, or hardscapes. Hardscapes provide space for many games and for certain types of performances. In addition to concrete and asphalt, surfaces can be made of concrete or stone pavers, bricks, or tile (including mosaics). Smooth surfaces, such as asphalt, can be painted.

Sustainable Design

The concept of sustainability should be a part of any school improvement project. A sustainable design is one that can be maintained over time. Some components of sustainable design include utilization of low-maintenance native plant materials and limiting projects to those that have committed resources for long-term conservation. For example, sustainable landscape projects will plan for increased planting areas that, once established, will require little maintenance and reduce grassy areas that require periodic mowing. An example of a sustainable architectural project would be one that is energy efficient, utilizing not only new technologies such as solar power, but, also, simply taking advantage of natural lighting and other site conditions.

Natural Play

The term "natural play" refers to the freeform exploratory manner of play that comes naturally to children. Rather than focussed on manufactured play equipment or facilities for organized sports and games, a natural play environment provides versatile unprogrammed spaces and structures that encourage imaginative play activities characterized by cooperation and interaction with the natural environment.

Play Equipment

Quality play equipment offers a variety of play activities. In addition to providing opportunities for physical activity and social interaction, play equipment manufactured today is designed with child safety in mind. These structures must be accessible to children with disabilities. As a result, such play structures are costly. Also, equipment with moving parts can be very costly to maintain. Required safety surfaces, which range from a thick layer of wood fibers to poured recycled rubber, vary greatly in costs and maintenance.

Safety

Safe play equipment is only one safety issue on the school grounds. Keeping students safe from traffic, crime, and environmental hazards must also be addressed. School grounds improvements require attention to the safety of everyone who uses the space, whether passively or actively.

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Types of School Improvement Projects

There is a wide range of school improvement projects that can create small to significant impacts, requiring minimal to extensive resources of time, effort, and money.

School Building Additions and Improvements - A school may lack adequate space for school activities and for community use or the school building may be in need of paint or new windows or doors. While out of the scope of this manual, there are resources available for these projects.

The Public School Construction Program provides State funding to help local jurisdictions renovate or construct public schools. Funds are available for eligible projects through application by local education agencies for total renovations; additions; replacement of building systems such as roofs, windows and doors, mechanical, and plumbing; and new schools. These types of projects require local matching funds.

School Building/Site Improvements - The Aging School Program subsidizes capital improvements to address the needs of older school buildings. Eligible project types include interior and exterior painting, site improvements, masonry work/repointing, ADA accessibility, as well as other types of projects eligible under the Public School Construction Program. Application for funding is made by the local education agency; no local matching funds are required. These projects are usually smaller with a minimum total cost of $10,000.

Entry Enhancements - This type of project can include both interior and exterior improvements such as new display spaces to highlight student art and other news or new entry signs or banners to welcome students and visitors to the school. Entry projects may also incorporate murals, mosaics, stained glass, or other artworks. Exterior entry enhancements may include landscaping and door or sidewalk replacement.

School Grounds Master Plans - A master plan will assess and program the entire school grounds. The process will examine all the current and future uses of the school grounds and establish design solutions (or at least concepts) for them. The full implementation of a master plan can be very costly, but it can be broken into smaller projects for implementation over several years.

Landscaping Projects - These provide a great hands-on way to involve children and adults in a beautification effort. Many times, it is possible to obtain free or discount plantings from local nurseries or natural resource organizations. It will take many volunteer hours to organize this type of event, but both the school and surrounding neighborhood benefit from such efforts. It is also a great way to attract positive media attention to the school.

Gardens - Garden projects are the highest maintenance projects on the school grounds. But because of this, school gardens offer an environment where students, teachers, parents, and neighborhood residents can work together on a project that can beautify the school grounds while providing numerous learning opportunities. Gardens are often designed around themes. Themes can relate to concepts such as colors or numbers; they can relate to cultural factors such as ethnic groups or historical facts; they can relate to the natural environment such as habitats for birds, insects, or animals; and they can relate to the arts such as characters or themes from literature or art.

Playgrounds - Areas of the school site designated as playgrounds should be safe and provide opportunities for a variety of play. A truly great playground goes beyond manufactured play equipment and fields and courts for organized games. The playground should invite "natural play" and contribute to the aesthetic appearance of the school grounds.

Note: If existing manufactured play equipment needs to be replaced, consult with the local school board to see if they have a contract with a particular play equipment contractor. If not, invite representatives from several companies to submit proposals for the purchase and installation of new equipment and choose the company that will provide the best value in price, function, design, and safety.

School Signs – Giving the school and community an opportunity to make a statement, a school sign is a relatively inexpensive and easy to implement project. A sign can include some landscaping to make a greater impact.

Signage and Markers – In addition to a school sign, directional signs and other markers can be added to the school grounds (for example, markers identifying trees found on the school grounds). These can vary in level of permanence and durability from painted wood to metal and in the level of design from simple straightforward information to artistic creations.

Footpaths and Stepping Stones – One way to deal with worn areas of the school grounds from cut-through foot traffic is to recognize and accept the path. The path can be landscaped and surfaced to make it an attractive feature of the school grounds. The path can be surfaced with asphalt or with purchased or student-made concrete paving stones. Gravel and mulch can be used but there will be maintenance issues as the material is worn away or spread out into the surrounding area.

Art Projects – Both students and adults can participate in theme development, design and implementation of murals, mosaics, and other art projects. Art projects can be accomplished inexpensively and within a relatively short time frame. They can also be incorporated into larger projects.

Suggested Art Projects—note that many of these projects are interdisciplinary and can be combined with natural science and math studies.

- **Birdhouse/box**: Students can investigate different types of birdhouses and boxes and the kinds of birds and other creatures that appreciate those homes. Students can then design and build the birdhouses and place them on the school grounds. It will also provide an opportunity to observe the feeding and nesting habits of birds.
- **Wind chimes**: Wind chimes can bring pleasant sound to garden spaces. Students can experiment with different materials and the different sounds made. There's a physics experiment in sound and in the construction of the wind chime illustrating dynamic tension, weights, balances, etc. There's a music lesson in creating tones.
- **Benches**: Students can work with an artist or craftsperson in exploring imaginative types of seating. Benches can be designed by the children and built or created from found objects like tree trunks.
- **Tire Animals**: Students can work with an artist in creating animal figures from recycled tires.
- **Containers**: There are numerous locations within the school grounds where students could place container gardens. There is an art lesson in how the containers are made and/or decorated.
- **Murals and Mosaics**: Both students and adults can participate in theme development, design and implementation of murals and mosaics. Participants can agree on a theme and research it prior to creating the design. These can be both interior and exterior or can be installed on large areas of pavement to revitalize wall and pavement surfaces.

Creating the School Improvement Partnership

Community Participation

One of the most critical concepts in the project development process is participation. The planning process should be participatory at every stage. This includes not only adult stakeholders but also students and other neighborhood children. The benefit of a participatory process is an enhanced sense of responsibility and ownership among community residents of all ages. It will also lead to better outcomes. Seeking input from children and adults will result in a plan that more accurately reflects needs and attitudes of those who will use and care for the school grounds.

Participation can take many forms. Several methods of involving children and adults in the process will be discussed in this section in the context of project components. Participatory activities will be required for the project planning and design; fundraising and volunteer development; marketing and promotion; and project sustainability.

Students

While every student in the school cannot be actively involved in the design process, a manageable group of students should be identified by the principal. The students could be part of an after-school program, a particular classroom, or an entire grade. The size of the group will affect the type of participation. Small groups can build models and work cooperatively on projects; larger groups may need to use surveys and workbooks to develop a design vision. There are many levels of student involvement and you may find that large projects such as school grounds master plans will involve several levels among different groups of students.

Design Professionals

For most projects, it may be necessary to find at least one designer to volunteer professional services to the project. Architects and landscape architects will be able to assist with the most common school improvement projects, but you may also need assistance from other professionals in the design, engineering, and construction fields. Ideally, you will be able to create an interdisciplinary team of designers. In the Baltimore area and in Prince George's County, the Neighborhood Design Center can assist in locating volunteer professional designers. Or, contact local chapters of professional design associations (American Institute of Architects; American Society of Landscape Architects; etc.). Most local chapters have a newsletter and/or website where you may be able to place a notice requesting assistance. Volunteer organizations may also be able to help you locate a designer. Look to neighborhood residents and parents who may be designers with time available to volunteer.

School/Community Partnerships

One of the most important components of any school improvement project is broadcasting the idea to as many potential partners as possible. This will help to create enthusiasm throughout the school and community and many partnerships are the result of networking. People and groups with similar interests and values tend to find each other as long as people are making new contacts and talking about their ideas.

Sometimes a community group may want to take the initiative in creating the partnership with the school; at other times, the school may seek to partner with the community. In either case, it is wise to build upon the existing civic infrastructure to identify and achieve goals.

Also, any group planning to make changes to the school buildings or site should consult with the central office of the board of education for input and, in some cases, approval of the project. They may know about plans for school grounds and/or building improvements that may impact your project. They may also be aware of resources to assist you.

Community to School

If you represent the community, there are several avenues to initiate a relationship with your local school even if you are not a parent or otherwise affiliated with the school.

- **Contact the school principal**
  One of the first persons to meet with will be the school principal. Principals are busy, but they are almost always interested in ways to improve the school. Discuss your concerns and ideas with them and let them know what resources you or your organization can bring to the effort.

- **Create a venue for school news**
  Invite school representatives to regularly present school news at community meetings. Keep the community aware of school activities and create opportunities for dialogue between the two groups.

- **Meet with existing school groups**
  Your local school may already have a committee or team addressing school improvements; if so, ask to meet with the group to discuss your concerns and ideas about the school grounds. If there is no group in place, meet with the Parent Teacher Organization to determine if there is interest in committing organizational resources to improving the school grounds.

School to Community

If you represent the school, there are a number of strategies that can lead to establishing partnerships among community groups.

- **Identify and contact local community groups**
  Usually, there are a number of groups active in any given community. It is likely that most of these organizations will have members who are parents of students or other residents who live near to or are interested in the appearance of the school.

  These types of organizations may be active in your community:

  - community development organizations
  - service organizations
  - churches/synagogues
  - homeowner/tenant associations
  - senior citizens
  - garden clubs; master gardener programs
  - youth organizations
  - environmental organizations
  - local government agencies
  - arts organizations

- **Contact local government agencies**
  Local government agencies can help you to identify groups in your community. Some agencies that may want to partner with you:

  - social services
  - police and fire
  - public housing
  - parks and recreation
  - environmental resources
  - economic development
  - arts and cultural agencies

  You will need to keep state, county, and local officials and agencies informed of the team's progress. Government staff can offer invaluable assistance to your project either through direct participation or by keeping the team informed about available resources. Don't forget to involve elected officials such as council members and mayors.

- **Ask for support from local business**
  Local businesses are often willing to donate cash or merchandise/services, and they may wish to be actively involved with the team. Either way, the support of local business will add credibility to your project. Especially be sure to contact businesses that are directly related to your project, such as greenhouses or building supply companies. Often they will offer discounts to school projects or donations of materials. Other businesses may be willing to assist with your promotion and fundraising activities.

- **Contact local media representatives**
  Establish contact with newspaper and television reporters (and other media persons) assigned to your community early in your effort. Keep them updated with occasional progress reports. Although little of your initial information may make it to print or on the air, the reporter will know who you are when you come seeking publicity for an upcoming important event.

Planning a School Improvement Project I: Getting Started

First Step: Are the school buildings and grounds in need of improvements?

Once you have organized a core group of school and community partners, start talking! Bring together this group of school administrators (preferably the principal), faculty, students, parents, and community representatives for a preliminary discussion of issues and concerns regarding aesthetics and physical conditions of the school and school grounds. This group, the School Improvement Partnership, will be responsible for continuing to build the partnership that will be necessary to see a project through implementation.

Don't despair if your partnership is small in number. A few dedicated individuals can accomplish a lot, regardless of size. You will need to assess the level of dedication of the group and make sure that the project selected is appropriate to it.

The first task the group should undertake is to make the decision whether to pursue a school improvement project. This will require taking an intensive look at the school buildings and grounds, identifying needs for such a project, and assembling school improvement teams.

Conducting a School Assessment

Obtain a site plan of the school and make copies small enough to distribute to the group, then take a walk around the school grounds. Ask participants to note their impressions directly on the map. Afterwards, the group should meet where the results can be compiled and discussed. Use the Preliminary School Assessment Tool on page 17 to facilitate this activity.

Needs/Attitude Analysis

It will be necessary to conduct surveys, interviews, and focus groups for all those who currently use the school grounds or groups you want to attract. Find out what people like and dislike about the school grounds and ask for ideas for improvements.

Another part of the needs analysis likely will require the participation of various professionals. Government agencies, non-profit organizations, and private firms concerned with environmental and cultural resources can visit your school grounds to alert you to existing conditions and opportunities.

Project Selection

The first major decision of the School Improvement Partnership will be to identify the project or projects the members will commit to planning and implementing.

School improvement projects can vary greatly in scope. The improvement may be relatively small such as installing and landscaping a school sign; or the project scope could be very broad such as a master plan that addresses the entire school site. The advantage of small projects is that they are relatively easy and fast to plan and implement. Their impact is immediately visible. The disadvantage is that it may not address all the school's needs or make the desired impact. On the other end of the scale, a school grounds master plan will identify improvements to address all the needs of the school and community, but the scale may be overwhelming. School grounds master plans could take several years to fully implement. If a master plan is produced, it can be implemented in several phases if necessary. This approach avoids having a series of unconnected projects occurring over a period of time that do not relate well to each other.

An alternative is to develop a prioritized list of potential projects. The final decision can wait until the feasibility of projects are evaluated. Use the Consensus Tool on page 18 to facilitate this activity.

As part of the project "scope", it will be necessary to state the objective of the project. For example, an objective might be "to establish a garden on the school grounds to serve as an outdoor learning resource", or, "to provide a safe place to play for school and neighborhood children". Determine what will be necessary to achieve the objective (more knowledge of child safety, outdoor learning techniques, or horticulture; fundraising expertise; design skills). The committee may also want to set a preliminary timetable for the project. A realistic timetable should be set taking into account time for

the design process, resource development, and the planting season.

Team Development

Once you know the type of project you want to undertake, you will be ready to start building teams of representatives of the School Improvement Partnership to undertake specific tasks required by the selected project. As part of the project scope, the Partnership identified the knowledge, skills, and other resources needed to complete the project. Now, the Partnership can start to seek out other community members who can fill those needs.

Each separate team will need individuals representing parents, teachers, community residents, business owners, non-resident stakeholders (from local government and non-profit agencies), and others. Teams can be formal or informal, but even an informal team should have a chair and vice-chair to coordinate activities and to communicate with the other teams.

Depending on the size of the project, teams may need to be established to take responsibility for the project components. For small projects, individuals could be responsible for some of the components. Some teams to consider:

- Design
- Curriculum Coordination
- Fundraising
- Marketing/Promotion/Public Relations
- Project Implementation
- Maintenance

Curriculum Coordination

Teachers and administrators should play a major role in determining any connections between the improvement project and the classroom curriculum. A classroom component isn't necessary for many school grounds improvements, but it is an excellent occasion to provide a unique learning opportunity for students and it can create a sense of ownership of the project among students, teachers, and parents.

Curricula connections can be made in virtually every area of classroom study. Projects can focus on natural sciences through the study of biodiversity, ecosystems, geology, weather, and plant and animal science. Social and cultural studies can be introduced through the examination of ethnic, regional, or historical uses or methods of gardening, food production, or design. Projects can also be focused on the arts through the design and production of arts projects on the school grounds (murals, sculptures, etc.), in the design of the school grounds, and in uses of the school grounds related to the arts such as performance spaces. These suggestions represent only a small sample of the many opportunities that will be available in your school grounds projects.

Theme/Concept Selection

Many school improvements are designed around a theme or a concept. For example, for a garden project, the theme of "butterflies" may be chosen. The design may include plants that attract butterflies; seating or other objects shaped like butterflies; a poem about a butterfly etched on a stone in the garden. Projects that are closely related to the classroom curriculum could include a unit on the study of butterflies.

Projects could be organized around a theme of school or community spirit. A new school sign, entryway improvements, or a mural project would present a good opportunity to celebrate that spirit. Use the Consensus Tool on page 18 to facilitate this activity.

Project Kickoff/Initiation

Let everyone know what you're doing! Come up with a catchy name for the project and organize a tree planting or other activity to make a public announcement of your project's objectives. Invite everyone. Make sure the project is mentioned in school and community newsletters.

Planning a School Improvement Project II: Design

The following process may be necessary for larger projects, such as master plans or any project that will make a major impact, where the team is working with a design professional.

Site Selection/Evaluation

Site selection will depend greatly on the type of project chosen; your design professional will provide valuable skills necessary in choosing a proper site.

The team should have a site and grading plan from the school. The site plan will indicate the layout of structures; location of trees and shrubs; the location of utilities (both above and below grade); the location of natural features such as waterways; and other valuable information. Building plans will be necessary for projects that include interior improvements. Use the Site Selection Tool on page 19 to facilitate this activity.

Once two or three potential sites are identified, arrange for representatives from your local public works and natural resource agencies to meet you at the site. They can provide invaluable assistance as you assess the site. Bringing the student team into the discussion would be a great learning opportunity. Make sure your guests are comfortable with working while being observed by a large group of young people.

Design Development

During the design development stage, the volunteer professional designer takes the site information, the project budget, the needs analysis, the selected theme (if applicable), and any other available information about the project and prepares design alternatives.

If students are involved in the design process, the designer will take the concepts they have developed and incorporate them into the draft designs.

- **Review design options**
  Once two or more alternatives are developed, the designer will present them to the Design Team and the students involved (if any). If the Design Team is satisfied with the alternatives, they should then be presented to the entire School Improvement Partnership for discussion and feedback.

- **Consensus building**
  Consensus is general agreement by a group of people. It may not mean that each person is satisfied with every detail, but rather that the majority of group members are willing to accept a decision.

  Choosing among the alternatives may not be as simple as choosing "Plan A" or "Plan B". Through the discussions, it may become apparent that different aspects of each alternative may be preferred.

- **Draft design**
  The designer will produce a final draft plan based on the preferences identified by the School Improvement Partnership. While the designer developed the design with the budget in mind, it will still be necessary to develop a preliminary cost estimate for the project construction. If the costs exceed the budget, the draft design will have to be adjusted to bring it within the budget. If the changes are extensive, it will be necessary to repeat the review process.

- **Final design**
  The final design should be displayed prominently in a public space – if possible, multiple copies, including small-scale copies, should be available. This is especially important if fundraising and volunteer recruitment is still underway. It will much easier to build support for the project with a specific design in hand.

School Improvement Project Implementation

Project Budget

A detailed project budget should be prepared itemizing the expenses related to the project. This should include the costs of plant and construction materials; construction and site work; purchase or rental of tools and equipment; and administrative and other expenses.

Implementation Plan

An implementation, or action, plan will detail action steps necessary to see the project completed. Each step should address the following:

- What needs to be done?
- Who will take the action?
- What resources (funds, people, support, etc.) are needed and available?
- When will the action be taken and how long will it take to complete?
- What are potential constraints and opportunities?
- Who should be informed about this action?

Use the Implementation Planning Tool on page 20 to facilitate this activity.

Construction

Small projects can be implemented using only community volunteers. Painting and simple maintenance is within the capabilities of most adults with the supervision of a volunteer professional contractor. The planting of small shrubs and trees can be handled by a group of adults, although supervision by a volunteer with knowledge of the proper way to plant them is essential. An improperly planted tree will not survive and will lead to disappointment and a waste of resources. Check with the nursery where the material was purchased or check with your local County Extension service, your local government natural resources department, greening organizations, college or university horticulture programs, or garden clubs in your community to seek volunteers and advice. With adult supervision, children can complete art projects and participate in planting annuals and perennials.

Larger projects requiring extensive site or construction work or planting large caliper trees (2.5 inches or greater) will require the skills and resources of an experienced landscape or contractor.

Maintenance

All school improvements will require some degree of maintenance to preserve them. Successful maintenance will require establishing a good relationship with the school maintenance staff, creating a sustainable design, and setting up a maintenance team of school and community volunteers.

Maintenance staff are often concerned about improvement efforts since most improvements mean additional responsibilities will fall to them. Make sure they are part of any discussions about the types of improvements being proposed. By seeking their input, you can establish a relationship characterized by cooperation. Maintenance staff are some of the most informed people regarding the physical aspects of the school buildings and grounds. They have a great deal of knowledge that will be useful to your project. While the ultimate decision belongs to the principal, wherever possible include school maintenance staff in project development.

One way to avoid creating maintenance problems is to make sure that principles of sustainable design are adopted by the design team. Maintenance can be problematic during the summer months particularly following a spring planting. Drought conditions can result in a ban on watering. In addition, if water is not readily available on or near the site, it will be difficult to stick to a watering schedule. It is a good idea to choose low maintenance plants and site them where maintenance problems will be minimized.

Most schools will have several water sources located outside of the building that require a special key to access. If the community is sharing watering responsibilities, it may be necessary for the school to make a key available to volunteers on weekends or other times when school is not in session.

Check with your local water company, some will provide residents with a low-cost device that allow a standard garden hose to be attached to a fire hydrant. Also, the device meters the water used so that the user can be billed.

Maintenance Plan

The Maintenance Team is the one team that will remain intact for some time after the project is completed depending on the necessary level of maintenance. Like the implementation plan, it should outline what actions are necessary, who will perform them, when will they take place, and what resources are needed.

Seek commitments from volunteers in the school (including students) and community. Work closely with the school maintenance staff and get commitments for which maintenance activities they are willing to assume. Put the plan in writing so that each person involved is aware of what responsibilities he has committed to as well as the responsibilities of others.

Marketing and Promoting the School Improvement Project

You may associate marketing with selling a product. While a major part of your marketing effort may involve "selling" the concept of your improvement project, marketing is more than selling. It involves a full range of communication activities that can be employed to build the public image of the project. There are three main marketing activities to focus on: Public Relations, Publicity, and Promotions.

Public Relations

Public relations, or "PR", activities will build goodwill and awareness of your project within your community.

Networking is an important aspect of project and team development, it will continue to be critical to maintaining strong public relations. Team members responsible for PR will make a point to familiarize themselves with people and organizations identified in your teambuilding activities. Remember the theory of the "six degrees of separation"—the belief that anyone in the world can be reached with no more than six telephone calls. Even if you don't personally know a local celebrity or leader that you want to invite to the groundbreaking ceremony, chances are someone in your network does, and it probably won't take six calls. Be sure to ask!

- The PR team should develop of list of contacts and people you want to reach
- Arrange short meetings with key people if possible
- Watch for community meetings and other opportunities to meet people

Through meeting with people and talking about the project you will build general public awareness of it.

Publicity

Publicity involves the dissemination of newsworthy information through media outlets: newspapers, radio, and television. Target local media and try to develop relationships with reporters on your local area beat or those who report on particular issues related to your project (for example, the arts, gardening, etc.). Send out a packet of information regarding the project and follow up with telephone calls.

Press releases

At regular intervals in the project process, the Marketing and Promotions Team should issue press releases. A good press release, and one most likely to attract the attention of editors, is:

- Concise
- Factual–answers who, what, when, where, and how
- Timely (be aware of deadlines)
- Newsworthy

Feature stories

A feature contains the facts about the project and places them in the context of broader social and cultural issues. It may also examine the personalities involved. Think strategically about when the appearance of feature stories could most likely boost interest and participation in the project. For example, a feature story that appears prior to a major event or following a major accomplishment may help with bringing in donations and volunteers.

Event listings/community calendars

Most local newspapers provide free listings of community-oriented events. Prior to the deadline for the edition in which your listing should appear, submit the event name, times, location, and any other essential information.

Public Service Announcements

Broadcast radio and television stations and local access stations on cable provide free air-time for public service announcements, or PSA's, usually in 10, 30, or 60 second spots. Televised PSA's may be scrolled across the screen and limited to a certain number of words. The PSA should contain only essential information presented in a factual, concise manner. Although PSA's are sometimes aired infrequently (or not at all) or during non-prime time slots, that is not always the case and PSA's are often heard by individuals who are difficult to reach through print media.

Newsletters

Many municipalities and community organizations publish monthly or quarterly newsletters and are usually looking for interesting short articles related to community activities and events.

Informal publicity

While media is an important resource for getting the word out about the project, don't neglect the value of announcing information about it at school and community meetings, church services, and other events.

Promotions

Promotions involve the materials the School Improvement Partnership produces to provide information about the project such as brochures or signs.

Early in the process, it will be helpful to develop a standard design "language" (consistent fonts, illustrations, a logo, etc.) and a catchy project name. In an environment where people are subjected to a barrage of visual information, it is important to establish a visual identity that is easily recognized. Avoid using clip art in published materials, rather, capitalize on local talent to create original artwork to promote the project.

Printed material can be costly but not necessarily expensive. Most word processing software is capable of producing good quality graphics that can be photocopied in a range of sizes using a variety of paper textures and colors.

Brochures, posters, flyers

Printed materials can promote a particular event or provide basic information. A basic information brochure can be created to introduce newcomers to the project. Posters can promote major events such as a dedication ceremony or fundraising events. Flyers can promote major events when broadly distributed or smaller events targeted at certain audiences.

Reports, PowerPoint presentations, press kits, websites

The basic project information supported by published pieces, press releases, photographs and other project documentation can be geared toward general audiences or tailored to appeal to specific audiences (funders, media, etc.).

Signs, banners, displays

A sign or banner placed on the site during the design process can build expectations about the project. The creation of a sign or banner can in itself be a school-community project for a kick-off event. A display featuring plans, photographs and other information can be placed in the school lobby to promote the project at school events. The display, along with a table of promotional materials, can be set up at community festivals and other events.

Other—buttons, t-shirts, etc.

Promotional items are most useful for morale building or rewarding project participants. For example, provide a t-shirt with the project logo and design to those volunteering for a major tree-planting event. Buttons or badges can be given to students participating in the design process. Donors of funds or materials may be given a t-shirt or other item as a token of appreciation and to help them feel a part of the School Improvement Partnership.

Finding Funds and Volunteers for a School Improvement Project

There are four basic sources of contributed resources:

- Individuals / Community Groups
- Corporations / Small Businesses
- Governments
- Foundations

The most obvious contributed resource is money, but just as important for school improvement projects are in-kind donations of materials or services. Also, you will likely need human resources in the form of community volunteers to perform a wide range of activities from serving on various committees to helping maintain the improvement. In general, with most fundraising and volunteer drives you will have greater success by approaching sources closest to the school and community. Use the Fundraising Plan Tool on page 21 to facilitate this activity.

Individuals and Community Groups

Individuals and members of community groups who may contribute time and money to your cause can come from all walks of life and their participation will vary greatly. Publicizing your project through media and other outlets and tapping into your network is the best way to reach these contributors. The school's neighbors, whether the garden enthusiast next door or the church across the street, are often a great source of dedicated donors and volunteers.

Corporations and Small Businesses

Look for corporations that conduct business in your area, preferably your immediate area. Many utility companies, chain retail stores, manufacturers, and professional service firms have at least some interest in supporting community projects. Small, locally owned businesses in your immediate area such as plant nurseries, print shops, and grocery stores may also want to contribute to your project. These businesses are often a great source of in-kind donations.

Governments

Depending on the municipality or county where the school is located, there may be a number of local sources of funding. Check with your local departments of natural resources, community development, and arts and cultural resources. These agencies will be able to direct you to state resources, as well. Approach your local board of education for Maryland Public School Construction Program funds.

Foundations

Charitable foundations may be a non-profit group organized around a particular cause, a non-profit wing of a for-profit corporation, or a private family fund. Focus your efforts on foundations that have a particular interest in both your location and the type of project for which you are seeking funds.

Fundraising

The basic principles of fundraising are the same for approaching both large and small contributors. They include:

- Cultivate donors. Take time to inform potential donors about the project and its importance. People who are familiar with your school and community are the most likely to give.
- Think about what the donor is getting for his or her contribution. It isn't enough to ask for money just because you need it. You have to make a compelling case for its importance in the larger community context.
- Ask in person and thank in person whenever possible. The direct approach is always best. Also, avoid sending form letters and other depersonalizing solicitations.

Fundraising efforts require support materials. The specific materials you will need will depend on the details of your fundraising plan, but you will most likely need the following:

- Request for Support Letter template that describes the project and explains the fundraising effort;
- Proposal template that describes the project in detail (including a budget);
- Flyer/Brochure that describes and illustrates the project and invites community participation;
- Thank you letter template that thanks donors for their contributions.

Earned-Income Fundraising

Sales

Money can be raised through selling donated home-baked goods; plants and flowers donated by a local nursery; kid-created calendars, greeting cards, or other items depicting the project; or raffle tickets to name a few suggestions. An example of less conventional "sales" is purchasing the "right" to wear jeans to school on a particular day.

Special Events

Charging admission to contests such as an art or costume competition or to shows (movies, plays, fashion) can raise significant amounts of money. Be sure to coordinate these activities with the school administration and groups with whom the School Improvement Partnership is competing to avoid conflicts in the use of facilities and in overtaxing your potential audience with numerous events.

Drives

Collecting donations during high traffic events at the school or other community locations can generate additional funds. It helps to focus such drives on specific items, for example, a drive built on the theme of "Buy a Plant" can be very effective. Have a list of options ranging from small donations for the purchase of a single 3" potted perennial for $2 to a large donation for the purchase of a tree for $100. Have a donation box handy for those who may want to merely contribute pocket change.

A note of caution for sales, special events, and drives: As any parent knows, schools are continually raising funds for any number of special projects and clubs. Try to coordinate with your competition on major events and watch out for "donor fatigue". You may want to consider teaming up with other groups for some fundraising activities (for example, sharing the proceeds of a bake sale).

Grants and Donations

Larger contributions can be obtained through securing grants and in-kind donations. However, donors may require that recipients be a recognized 501(c)(3) organization, a designation by the federal government that the organization is tax-exempt. Another advantage of establishing a true partnership is that funds with such requirements can be sought under the auspices of one or more non-profit partners participating in the project.

Grant Writing

There are grants available for community projects ranging from one hundred dollars to thousands of dollars. Look for grant opportunities from your local community foundation, all levels of government, and corporations and foundations with local interests. Request information from the granting organization regarding the required format and for a list of recent grants to help you determine through comparison if the organization might be interested in the project.

It will be important to tap into your network to establish contact with key staff in granting organizations to increase your chances of receiving funding. The Maryland Association of Non-Profits (MANO), the Foundation Center, and other organizations offer low-cost or free training for grantseekers.

Securing In-kind Donations

The donation of goods and services can include professional services (architects, lawyers, accountants, etc.), paper, printing, mailings, equipment, construction and plant materials, art supplies, or items to be raffled or auctioned. In-kind donations are often the easiest to obtain and can represent sizable contributions. Many business managers have discretion in making a certain amount of this type of contribution on the spot with approval from their supervisors.

Identify the budget items that could be donated and target local businesses and local branches of national corporations to approach. Remember to cultivate and thank this donor just as you would the donor of cash.

Volunteer Recruitment

While most of the members of the School Improvement Partnership are volunteers, your project may require recruiting additional volunteers to assist with events or to perform a special function. These volunteers are not a member of one of the Teams but are brought into the project on an "as-needed" basis.

Pro Bono Professional Services

As the project develops, the need for additional professional services may arise. Services needed may include those of an attorney, an accountant, a marketing specialist, a horticulturist, or other professionals. Identifying the need for these services should occur at the Team level along with strategies for procuring those services.

In general, professional volunteers can be recruited through the following means:

- **Tap into your network**
  Chances are that someone in the Partnership or in your broader network knows someone who may be able to provide the service you need. Start asking around and asking others to tap into their networks.

- **Professional Associations**
  Many professions will have a local chapter of a professional association. Some of these associations may have a newsletter or other means for you to recruit a volunteer. At a minimum, they will have a list of professionals in your community that you can approach.

- **Volunteer Organizations**
  Most communities are served by a volunteer organization that specializes in recruiting professionals from the design, business, or legal professions. In the Baltimore and Prince George's County areas, the Neighborhood Design Center recruits volunteers to provide professional design services.

Event Volunteers

Special events and activities may require volunteers to provide additional manpower or general skills, often in large numbers. For example, a garden project may require a large number of community volunteers to plant shrubs and trees. There are several methods for recruiting these volunteers:

- **Local Parents and Community Residents**
  For school projects, parents and community residents who live near the school are often most interested in participating in activities that will improve the school. Send a flyer home with students requesting volunteers and distribute the flyer to homes within a close radius of the school.

- **Volunteer Organizations/Listings**
  Some communities are served by a volunteer organization that maintains listings of volunteer opportunities that are distributed to persons and service organizations interested in volunteering. In Maryland, two such organizations are Volunteer Maryland and Volunteer Central. Also, many community newspapers carry listings of volunteer opportunities.

- **Service Organizations**
  Most communities have service organizations such as fraternities or other social or church groups that are capable of providing a number of volunteers for events they deem worthy. Listings of these organizations are often available from volunteer organizations. Also, tap into your network to find out about local service organizations.

- **Military Bases**
  If there is a military base in your area, call the officer in charge of public relations, well in advance, to see if personnel will be available to help out with a community event.

- **Businesses**
  Some chain retail, telecommunications firms, and other businesses offer the volunteer services of their staff to community events. Call the store manager or community relations officer well in advance of your event.

Preliminary School Assessment Tool

1. What are the perceptions as one walks by the school grounds? Are the school grounds aesthetically pleasing? _____

_____

_____

2. Are there obvious environmental problems or conditions such as erosion, worn areas, or steep slopes? _____

_____

_____

3. Is there adequate signage to guide visitors into and through the school? _____

_____

4. Is there sufficient outdoor play space for the number of children who use it? _____

_____

_____

5. Is the play equipment in good condition? Is it age-appropriate? _____

_____

6. Is there a balance of hardscape and grassy play areas? _____

_____

7. Are there natural areas including native plants, shrubs, and trees for study and beauty? _____

_____

_____

8. Are there places to sit outdoors? _____

_____

9. Are there shady areas? _____

_____

10. Is water available for drinking and watering plants? _____

_____

_____

11. Do the school grounds provide opportunities for serving community recreational needs? _____

_____

_____

12. Are there hazards on the site that should be removed? _____

_____

Consensus Tool

The following exercise can be adapted to a wide range of situations where a group must come to consensus on a choice among many alternatives. It can be used for choosing a project, for brainstorming garden or playground themes, or for prioritizing almost any type of list generated during a meeting. This tool is easily used among adults or children.

Materials:

- Flip chart pads or a wide roll of kraft paper
- Masking tape
- Non-permanent markers in assorted colors
- Small stickers
- 3x5 cards

You will need to select two group members, one to serve as facilitator and one to serve as recorder. The facilitator will interact with the group, the recorder will write the responses on the pads or kraft paper.

Distribute 3x5 cards. Ask participants to note interesting ideas regarding the topic being discussed. You might want to begin with a slide show or discussion related to the issue to inspire ideas.

Following the presentation, go around the room to ask each person for his or her ideas. Ask the participants to avoid discussion of the suggestions. The objective is to compile a list; evaluation can come at a later time. The recorder will write the suggestions on the pad. Sometimes for the sake of brevity, it may be necessary to rephrase someone's comment. Always ask the participant if they approve of the rephrasing before moving on to the next person. Also, for ease of reading, it is helpful to alternate the color of marker used to record each response as the list is generated. As pages are filled, they are mounted on the wall with the masking tape so that the group will have previous responses for reference.

Tip: to save time, prior to the discussion, tear off several strips of tape and loosely attach to the easel or other surface.

The facilitator should draw out those who are reluctant to speak out but allow people to pass temporarily (don't forget to return to them later). Keep going around the room getting ideas; go around a second or third time if the momentum is there. When it seems the group may have exhausted their ideas, ask for any last additions to the list.

Distribute 5 to 10 stickers to each participant. The number of stickers will depend on the size of the crowd, compared to the size of the list. Give more stickers if there are many more themes than participants. A good rule of thumb is that you should generate at least twice as many ideas as participants and the number of stickers should be half the number of group members (for example, 20 ideas, 10 participants, 5 stickers). Invite participants to place stickers on their favorite ideas, suggestions, etc., on the list. This should result in a prioritized list.

At this point, the process could continue in several directions.

- The ten most popular suggestions could be placed as headings on separate sheets of paper. The participants could discuss each theme as a group noting how the suggestion could be developed.
- The participants could be divided into sub-groups and each sub-group could brainstorm ideas for how to use that suggestion and then present their ideas to the larger group.
- The sub-groups could take a suggestion, explore it, and report back at a subsequent meeting.

Once all the ideas have been explored and presented to the larger group, each participant should be given two or three stickers (or half the original number of stickers) to choose their ultimate favorites. If the results are close among two or three themes, participants may want to vote again.

Site Selection Tool

1. Is the site large enough to accommodate the project?_____

_____

_____

2. Will there be conflicting uses? Will the proposed project interfere with normal activities? For example, a sculpture placed at the entrance of the school may interfere with student traffic._____

_____

_____

3. Is the structure adequate for art projects that will be mounted on or suspended from existing elements?_____

_____

_____

4. Are there utilities underground that could interfere with the installation of play equipment or other outdoor structures?_____

_____

_____

5. Is there access to water on the site to facilitate maintenance of landscape projects?_____

_____

_____

6. Is the site safe? For example, if the project is a playground, is it removed from traffic? Will the project interfere with important sight lines? For example, will landscaping obscure visibility? Is the site vulnerable to vandalism?_____

_____

_____

_____

7. Is there asphalt or concrete that will be costly to remove?_____

_____

8. Is the site well-drained? Check after rain for pooled water._____

_____

9. Is there enough sunlight? Or too much?_____

_____

10. Does the site feature a slope, waterway, or other natural feature that could present a hazard?_____

_____

11. Is there an existing natural habitat on the site that will be disturbed or destroyed by your project?_____

_____

Implementation Planning Tool

Use the matrix below to record the information needed to implement your project.

- **Action Step**: What needs to be done?
- **Person(s)responsible**: Who will take the action or take responsibility for seeing that it is completed?
- **Resources**: What resources (funds, people, support, etc.) are required and available for the action step?
- **Timeline**: When will the action be taken and how long will it take to complete?
- **Constraints/Opportunities**: What are potential impediments to completing the action step? What possibilities exist that may assist in completing the action step?
- **Partners**: Are there other entities or persons who could be involved or who should be informed?

Action Step	Person(s) Responsible	Resources	Timeline	Constraints/ Opportunities	Partners

Fundraising Plan Tool

Estimated cost of the project(s)	$
Funds on hand	**$**
Total funds to be raised	**$**
List Fundraising activities:	**Estimated income and event date**
1.	$
2.	$
3.	$
4.	$
5.	$
List businesses/corporations to approach for donations:	**Type (cash or in-kind) and amount of donation:**
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
Send out proposals to businesses	By:
Follow up calls	By:
Government/Foundation grants	**Amount requested/Proposal due date**
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

Small Project Case Study: Bladensburg High School Sign

The Neighborhood Design Center (NDC) was approached by the Bladensburg Rotary Club to work with their local high school counterpart, the Bladensburg High School Interact Club. The two groups were interested in making improvements to the school grounds with particular interest in making an impact at the front of the school. The project was complicated by the fact that the school was slated for demolition at an unspecified point within the next few years. A short life-span would have to be factored into what projects were planned.

The Neighborhood Design Center recruited two volunteers, both landscape architecture students from the University of Maryland. The NDC volunteers met several times with the student group to discuss the various sites on the school grounds in need of improvement and to develop a list of proposals.

The Interact and Rotary Club members discussed each proposal and identified the advantages and disadvantages to each. Some of the issues were visibility, costs, and the uncertainty regarding the future of the school. They chose to devote their energies to refurbishing the school sign.

The Class of 1976 had installed a wood and brick sign several years previously. The masonry was in good shape, but the sign was very weathered and cracked. The sign was flanked by two badly overgrown evergreen shrubs. The NDC volunteers developed a planting plan for the site that specified mature, low-maintenance plants. A teacher who was sponsoring the Interact Club approached the wood shop teacher about having one of his classes refurbish the sign. With these project elements established, members of the Rotary and Interact Clubs met with the school principal to present the plan.

The principal was delighted with the plan and a date was set to unveil the repaired sign and to install the landscaping. The Rotary Club purchased the plant material with member donations and the site was prepared by one of its members who was a construction contractor. Both clubs got together on a Saturday to complete the project.

To economize, some of the plants were smaller than those specified on the plan. This resulted in a less dramatic impact and, since smaller plants are more vulnerable to harsh conditions such as those in the following summer drought some did not survive. Also, the school sign was located a good distance from the building and that distance may have contributed to the lack of watering. Still, the sign was refurbished and some plants did survive the summer making an improvement to the school entrance that the project team had hoped for.

Lessons Learned

- Develop the project among the school, a school organization, and a community organization. This can can be very effective in pooling resources.
- Involve the principal from the beginning to ensure that nothing would impede its implementation.
- Select and purchase appropriate plants for the site.
- Choose a project scale appropriate to the level of available resources of time, money, and people.
- Make sure that maintenance is identified as part of the plan.

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Large Project Case Study: The Shadyside Elementary School Master Plan

The Shadyside Elementary School project began when the PTA was approached by the Neighborhood Design Center at the suggestion of a local government planner. NDC hoped to interest the school in participating in its new youth program "Growing Communities" and the PTA was interested in landscaping the school grounds. NDC's program involved the development of small garden spaces or community arts projects. Volunteer design professionals would come to the classroom and work with students in creating a plan. Parents, teachers, and school administrators, assisted by the Neighborhood Design Center, would seek resources for implementing the project.

At the initial meeting of NDC staff with the chair of the PTA Landscape Committee, two interested teachers, and the school principal, it became apparent that the group was interested in pursuing extensive landscape improvements. The group suggested that NDC work with students in developing a schoolyard master plan.

NDC developed a classroom curriculum designed to take students through the community design process. Two professors from the University of Maryland system assisted staff in developing the curriculum and took the lead in the classroom activities. Several parents joined in the classroom activities also.

Over the next several weeks, a fourth grade class and a first grade class met together to develop an inventory of existing conditions, develop and conduct surveys, and complete several visioning exercises. The professor of landscape architecture and two other design professionals recruited by NDC used the results to develop three design alternatives. The alternatives were discussed with the students, parents, teachers, school administration, and maintenance staff. The best elements of each were used to develop the final plan.

While the classroom activities were taking place, the PTA Landscape Committee was busy raising money to implement the plan. The school principal promised to match whatever funds the PTA could raise. Through several bake sales and other activities the Committee raised a large amount of money, mostly as a result of the leadership and enthusiasm of the Committee Chair.

By chance, and by keeping local government officials informed of the project, the school received additional funds toward the project that was part of a surplus from a local state road project. While the team had an impressive amount of money, it was not nearly enough to implement the entire plan. The team decided to concentrate on one section of the plan, the Reading Grove, located at the front of the school site.

A landscape contractor was paid to prepare the site and plant large trees on the last day of school. One problem that surfaced on the day the contractor arrived was his inability to move the baseball backstop that was on the project site. It required more equipment and manpower than he had available (or that the team could afford to pay for). The school requested that the local board of education move the equipment and remove some unsafe, older playground equipment that also impacted the site. The board of education could not undertake the project immediately but agreed to at an indeterminate point in the future. It was decided that the contractor should plant the trees as planned and the equipment moved at a later time.

Another problem encountered was finding the plant material specified on the plan. The landscape designer had gone abroad and was not available to make revisions. Many of the plants and trees identified on the plan were not available at the local nurseries. Another volunteer designer had to be sought to step in and help identify substitutes. Also, due to an error in the base map, the actual site turned out to be considerably larger than indicated on the plan. This resulted in the plantings being stretched over a larger space, lessening the impact.

The next Saturday, forty parents, students, teachers, and neighbors got together to plant the remaining shrubs and ground covers and to mulch the site. Another NDC volunteer was on hand to demonstrate the proper way to install the plant material; however, she could not attend to every shrub being planted that day. The contractor had tilled the site, but the ground remained very hard and digging was difficult. Through fatigue, many of the holes dug for some of the large shrubs were too shallow and proved to be inadequate.

Still, the work was completed just prior to a major thunderstorm and, though a little skimpier than envisioned, made a noticeable improvement to the school site. On the advice of the landscape contractor and NDC volunteers, the parents set up and stuck to a vigorous watering schedule throughout the drought conditions of the following summer. The harsh conditions combined with the probable improper planting resulted in losing some of the shrubs and ground covers. Most of the plants and trees did survive, however, and most everyone involved in the process was pleased with the results.

The following year, the team was able to add a few plantings, but the board of education never removed the baseball backstop. It continues to disrupt the Reading Groove as it was envisioned and prevents the completion of a path made up of student-made concrete stepping stones that was in the original design. Because of the proximity to the play area, many of the shrubs have been destroyed. In addition, the Landscape Committee lost its energetic Chair and was not active in the following year.

Also, after the creation of the Master Plan, the school became aware of plans to either rebuild or add to the present school building. Many of the areas identified for improvements in the master plan will no longer be available. The uncertainty surrounding the future of the school has put the effort to implement the rest of the plan on hold.

Lessons Learned

- Encourage student participation. The classroom activities were a great success and unique opportunity for students to participate in affecting their own environment
- Encourage the teamwork of parents, teachers, volunteers, school administrators. While the plantings represented only a small part of the overall plan, the team at Shadyside was able to make significant improvement to the appearance of the school with the introduction of nine major trees and several large shrubs.
- Stay in touch with officials from local government agencies, including the local board of education, in order to be alerted to special programs, requirements, and long-range plans.
- Keep the school maintenance staff aware of project needs and seek their input. The Shadyside project team was able to work out a watering plan and share the responsibility for it through the drought conditions the summer following the installation of the trees and other plant material.
- Have the designer available during the implementation to deal with errors and last-minute changes or to check the final plan on site. Mistakes are inevitable; make sure that anyone who volunteers to design the project is willing to see it through to the implementation.
- Identify problems with the site and deal with them prior to preparing and planting the site.
- Develop realistic estimates of the total project costs and include a contingency fund. Whenever a master plan or large project is planned, it is extremely important to identify several phases of implementation and be very clear and realistic about how much time will be required to implement the project (for example, identify the project as a five-year plan or a ten-year master plan).
- Make sure that plant material is properly sited and planted. Stress the proper planting technique to community volunteers and only plan to plant as much material as time and conditions permit. Make sure that plantings are buffered from the most the active areas of the schoolgrounds.
- Encourage broad and equitable participation. Try not to depend too heavily on one energetic participant to motivate the rest of the team. It's important to make sure that responsibilities are shared and that one individual is not always expected to take the initiative in organizing activities.

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